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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 004231

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI (BSHUKAN), DRL (SCARPENTER,
BARKS-RUGGLES), DRL/IRF (AMB HANFORD, LISTON, SCHNEIDER,
LURIE)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAG DECREE ON RELIGIOUS POLICE GAUGES PUBLIC
SUPPORT

REF: RIYADH 3841

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David H. Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Recent media and Web site reports carried news of a decree issued by the Ministry of Interior May 24, which some interpret as an effort to curtail the seemingly unlimited and undefined authority of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, also known as the religious police or Mutawwa'in. In a decree issued to all 13 provinces, Interior Minister Prince Nayef stated that the role of the Mutawwa'in would end "at arresting the accused persons and handing them to the police." He instructed that cases involving harassment by Mutawwa'in would no longer be handled internally by the religious police, but rather be transferred for investigation to the Board of Investigation and Prosecution, an independent board in each province that answers to the governor. Prince Nayef later commented that the new procedures were not an attempt to limit the authority of the Mutawwa'in.

¶2. (C) Comment: The Mutawwa'in are a long established part of the Saudi political landscape. They are an important source of employment for graduates of religious universities and a central pillar of the religious establishment's authority. However, they report directly to the King and are funded by the Ministry of Finance. They are not independent actors and the decree reemphasizes this fact. Moreover, the Mutawwa'in's more aggressive behavior is widely unpopular with more liberal Saudis. The golden rule of Al Saud rule is to find balance between the conservative and modernizing elements of Saudi society. This decree is a concession to the more moderate elements, a means of limiting the Mutawwa'in's more extreme behavior, and a means of gauging the level of public support for the Mutawwa'in. End Comment.
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